ELDERBERRY ARCHIVES

BY ZERBYTRON

A SERIES FOR ALL AGES ABOUT TWO GRANDPAS NAMED JOHN AND GEORGE, ALONG WITH THEIR PURPLE MONKEY FRIEND NAMED PEANUT AND THE GRUMPY HENRY.

ARCHIVE #3: 404 SCHOOL STREET

The next day in Willowbrook arrived under a thick blanket of gray clouds. The air was cool, still, and oddly heavy, as if the town itself was holding its breath.

Grandpa John steered his electric golf cart down Benton Street, the soft hum of the motor the only sound. Grandpa George sat beside him, staring around with cheerful curiosity. Peanut sat in the back, wearing his neon green aviator goggles, holding a blank sign.

They turned a corner onto School Street. At the far end of the road stood something wrong.

It was a small, two-story apartment building, but nothing about it was normal. The paint was an unpleasant maroon, peeling in long strips to reveal an older white beneath it that looked far better. Every window was pitch black, not reflective, not transparent — just flat darkness. Behind the structure rose a tall coal chimney that was still standing, with a narrow, open entrance below it leading into an unfinished underground basement.

John slowed the cart.

George pulled out his smartphone. He looked at the screen, then at the building, back at the screen, then at the building again.

He grinned. “404 BUILDING NOT FOUND!”

John didn’t laugh. “That building was constructed in 1941. Long before the internet existed.”

George turned the screen toward him. “It says right here.”

John glanced once. “I know the address.”

George pointed. “So what is that ugly building?”

John kept his eyes on it. “Old apartments. People lived there until about ten to twelve years ago. Then they didn’t.”

A long pause followed.

George tilted his head. “WHAT?! You said they slept with ham?”

“No,” John replied. “I said they left.”

George nodded. “Ah. That makes more sense.”

He leaned back, still staring at the building. “What do you think happened in there?”

John exhaled slowly. “Sketchy tenants. Bad management. Maybe something worse. Nobody ever gave a straight answer.”

George’s face lit up. “You know who should live there? Henry!”

From down the street, a familiar voice shouted instantly.

“I HEARD THAT!”

Henry popped up from inside his dumpster, already scowling. “Absolutely not!”

George pointed proudly. “See? Plenty of space! Even has a coal chimney!”

Henry snarled, “Coal? COAL?! Coal is outdated, filthy, and useless! Just like nasty diesel! And now those two are being dragged back into use thanks to Manny!”

Peanut held up a sign:

“BAD IDEAS RETURN FAST.”

Henry reached down into his dumpster and pulled out a crumpled paper. “And look at this.”

The headline read:

“Location, location, location!!! As true for this property as ever stated before. This prime investment property boasts 0.86 acres next to the downtown strip of Willowbrook, offering tremendous potential for a wide variety of business opportunities.”

Below it were three photos.

The first showed the front — crooked, peeling, lifeless.

The second showed the side — cracked walls and broken trim.

The third showed a collapsed section with a massive pile of debris next to it.

Henry laughed sharply. “Nearly a million dollars for that. Didn’t even bother to clean up anything.”

John frowned. “That building should be torn down.”

Henry nodded. “Exactly.”

At that moment, a black crow landed on the roof. It let out a harsh caw, then it flew away.

Henry narrowed his eyes. “That place is wrong. Stay out of it.”

They went back anyway.

At exactly midnight, John, George, and Peanut stood outside the building again. Each held a flashlight. A thermos of cocoa and a bag of snacks sat in the cart.

The front door creaked open with almost no effort.

Inside, the air was stale and heavy. The walls were stained, the floor uneven, and the ceiling sagged in places. Every step echoed too loudly.

John whispered, “We shouldn’t be here.”

Peanut held up a sign:

“TOO LATE NOW.”

They moved deeper inside.

A hallway stretched ahead — long, narrow, and dark.

Then they heard it.

A dragging sound that was slow and uneven, followed by raspy breathing.

The three froze.

Their flashlight beams trembled slightly as they pointed forward. From the darkness, something moved.

A pale, elongated figure crawled into view with movement that was jerky, deliberate, and wrong. Its limbs stretched too far, bending in ways that did not match anything natural. Its head tilted at an unnatural angle.

George leaned toward John. “WHAT?! Did your great, great, GREAT grandpa crawl out of his grave to see you?”

John whispered sharply, “No!”

George waved. “Hello there! How are you on this fine spooky night?”

The figure snapped its head toward them, then moved fast.

“RUN!” John shouted.

They rushed into the nearest room and slammed the door shut, locking it. All three pressed their backs against it.

A small viewing hole in the door showed the creature crawling into view, moving quickly. Then it stopped. Slowly, it stood upright. Its body stretched unnaturally tall. Then it leaned forward and looked directly through the hole.

A slow grin spread across its face.

Sharp, yellow teeth filled its mouth. Its breath fogged the hole, thick and foul.

George wrinkled his nose. “PHEW! Does that thing brush its teeth? That’s some awful breath!”

John whispered, “No talking.”

Peanut quickly scribbled:

“IT NEEDS MINTS.”

The creature began pushing on the door. The handle jerked, the door shook, and the deadbolt strained.

All three pushed back with everything they had.

The creature stopped, waited, then slowly… turned away. It crawled back down the hallway and disappeared.

Silence returned.

They waited.

One minute.

Two.

Five.

John whispered, “We leave. Now.”

They opened the door slowly, moved quietly, step by step, then went out the front door and into the cart.

John turned the key and they drove.

A sound exploded from inside the building. A horrible, piercing screech.

All three jumped.

Then, movement followed. It burst out of the building and charged after them at a terrifying speed.

John’s eyes widened. “GO, GO, GO!”

The cart sped up.

George grabbed a tub from the back. “Emergency beans! Take this, you noodle nightmare!”

He hurled it, which missed completely.

The tub sailed past the creature and exploded all over Henry in his dumpster.

Henry shot upright, quite furious. “WHO DID THAT?! IT’S THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT AND I WAS SLEEPING!!!”

The grandpas screamed.

Henry shouted, “KEEP IT DOWN, YOU SENILE LUNATICS!!! SOME OF US ARE TRYING TO SLEEP!!!”

George pointed wildly. “THE BEAN MONSTER IS HERE!”

Henry wiped beans off his face. “I’M NOT A BEAN MONSTER! IT’S ME, HENRY! AND HOW OLD ARE THESE BEANS?!”

John yelled, “This was your idea, George!”

Henry grabbed a tomato and threw it, which missed them and hit the creature directly in the face.

He blinked. “Oh no.”

The creature slowly turned its head toward him, then screeched and lunged.

Henry slammed the dumpster lid shut and locked it. The creature clawed at the metal, fast, violently, and loud.

“HEY! BACK OFF!” Henry roared from inside. “DON’T MAKE ME COME OUT THERE!”

The dumpster shook.

Henry began to show a hint of fear. “YOU DO NOT WANT ME TO COME OUT THERE! I WILL IF YOU DON’T STOP!”

The scratching intensified. Metal bent and the lid rattled. A loud screech echoed.

George waved as the cart sped off. “Good luck!”

John snapped, “George!”

From inside the dumpster, Henry hollered, “YOU WERE WARNED NOT TO GO IN THERE!”

Five minutes later, they reached home, rushed inside, locked every door, and hid in the closet.

Back on Benton Street, the creature continued clawing at Henry’s dumpster. For twenty minutes, it scratched, screeched, and tried to pry the lid open.

Then, it stopped.

Slowly, the creature turned and crawled back toward the building. The door creaked open, then closed.

The street was quiet again.

Inside his dumpster, Henry sat still.

“…I told them,” he muttered.

And across town, in a locked closet, three very shaken companions did not sleep at all.